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The core executive and small states: Is coordination the primary challenge?

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Abstract

This article interrogates three key arguments derived from the functional approach to studying the core executive: (1) that coordination is the primary problem that confronts executive decision-makers; (2) that improved coordination will lead to better governance; and (3) that linkage problems dissipate as policy systems consolidate. Drawing on the experience of hitherto understudied small states, including 112 interviews with political elites, we show how the effects of country size create governance challenges in the form of leader dominance, patronage systems and capacity constraints. Our findings support the call to broaden the focus of functional analysis beyond its traditional emphasis on coordination. For scholars of small states we synthesize existing empirical findings and provide a theoretical justification for future work using an adaptation of the core executive approach.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Three decades ago the term 'core executive' was introduced by Dunleavy and Rhodes (1990) to replace 'cabinet government' and better explain central government decision-making. They argued that the phrase cabinet government was misleading in assuming a primary coordination mechanism. It had also become a normative assertion about how government should be run rather than an analytical device for empirical study. Since then, the phrase core executive has transformed conceptualizations of central government (Elgie 2011) because its focus on the 'complex web of institutions, networks and practices surrounding the PM, Cabinet, cabinet committees and their official counterparts, less formalized ministerial "clubs" or meetings, bilateral negotiations, and interdepartmental committees'

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(Rhodes 2017, p. 138) better explained how the apex of government worked. The emphasis on coordination also complemented the related shift, especially in the Anglo-European literature, from the study of 'government' to 'governance' (Marsh and Rhodes 1992; Rhodes 1997; Sørensen and Torfing 2009). Consequently, the core executive is said to form part of the field's 'new orthodoxy' (Elgie 2011; Marsh 2011; Andeweg et al. 2020).

Despite attempting to move away from the assumption that cabinet is the primary coordination mechanism, the approach attracted criticism for retaining coordination as the predominant focus of analysis. Andeweg (1997, p. 59), for example, questioned whether 'coordination should be the defining function of Cabinet government', arguing that a fixation with this function meant that the approach did not dispel 'the fog around the edges of the concept of Cabinet government'. For Andeweg, a focus on other aspects of executive decision-making, like accountability or legitimacy, would better link input and output functions. The geographic concentration of existing studies in large, wealthy states in Europe, North America and Japan where coordination is the primary challenge reinforced this predisposition (Elgie 2011), and occurred despite Dunleavy and Rhodes' (1990) argument that a key virtue of the framework was that it enabled a more explicitly comparative approach. Heilman and Stepan's (2016) study of China provides an exception but, again, the focus on a large state where coordination is 'most likely' to be an issue restricts the concept's global applicability.

There are two distinct approaches to the core executive: the resource dependency approach and the functional approach. Elgie (2011) argues that the former assumes that actors in the core executive depend on others to achieve their goals; that to do so they exchange resources; that this takes the form of a game in which they seek to minimize dependence and maximize resources; that games overlap and no one actor dominates; and that resources are not fixed. This approach builds on a rationalist logic that focuses on the utility maximization of individual actors in the executive. However, as Elgie (2011) further outlines, scholars who adopt this perspective usually retain a structural element to their analysis because they see resources as located in specific positions. By contrast, Rhodes (1997, p. 1247) explicitly argues that resources are not fixed. Thus, while scholars use the term 'core executive', the resource dependency approach is better characterized as an extension of the pre-1990s studies rather than the step change Dunleavy and Rhodes (1990) envisaged (cf. Andeweg et al. 2020).

The functional approach, by contrast, has tended to be descriptive, 'charting changes in the organizations within the core executive and how their roles have changed' (Elgie 2011, p. 70). The primary focus has been coordination and specifically how the centre of government ensures policy coherence among the wider political system, including networks of bureaucrats, party organizations and civil society. Analysis has revolved around establishing three core arguments (see Brady and Catterall 1997; Goetz and Margetts 1999; Holliday and Shinoda 2002; Burch and Holliday 2004; and Elgie 2011 for review): (1) that coordination between actors and institutions is the primary problem that confronts executive decision-makers; (2) that improved coordination will lead to better governance; and (3) that coordination problems dissipate as policy systems consolidate.

To interrogate the relevance of these claims we focus on six 'least likely' cases for coordination problems (Gerring 2007; Levy 2008): small states from three world regions (Europe, the Caribbean and the Pacific), thus far largely excluded from comparative studies of executive governance. Small states are 'least likely' cases for coordination challenges because their governance is defined by intimate social networks and the hyper-personalization of politics (Corbett and Veenendaal 2018), which should increase harmonization between the actors who make up the core executive. That is not to say coordination wouldn't be a problem in small states. But we would expect other challenges to be more significant. Following the logic of a 'least likely' design, if coordination is the primary challenge then this supports conventional wisdom in functional analysis by adding new and unique cases. If it isn't, then our cases support Andeweg's (1997) claim that the functional approach needs to be broadened to include other challenges, such as accountability and legitimacy, alongside coordination. Further work might then test whether this is true of all small states or only those considered here. Either way, the significance of our intervention turns on linking the literature on executive studies with scholarship on how state size affects governance practices, including our own empirical work on small states (see especially Veenendaal 2014; Corbett 2015a; and Corbett and Veenendaal 2018).

We find that arguments about the challenge of coordination in large, rich states have little empirical purchase in small ones: these states are established policy systems in which small size and the highly personalized politics this begets facilitate a natural level of informal coordination. However, rather than making executive decision-making more flexible and effective, this leads to the centralization of executive authority. The formation and consolidation of clientelistic networks also reduces state capacity. These dynamics appear in all six 'most different' small states analysed, and we therefore hypothesize that these findings can be generalized to other small states (roughly 20 per cent of all states have a population of less than one million citizens). Following Andeweg's (1997) call to broaden the number of functions that the approach covers, we conclude that while the focus of core executive studies on contingent relationships helps explain government in small states, the primary governance challenges in this context relate to accountability and capacity, not coordination. We therefore contribute to the core executive literature by providing empirical evidence for a broader conceptualization of the functional approach. For scholars of small states, we synthesize existing empirical findings and provide a theoretical justification for future work on the core executive.

To substantiate these claims we first review the literature on the core executive to connect debates about coordination and linkages to arguments about the effects of state size. Second, we discuss our novel data and comparative approach. Our analysis draws on 112 interviews with politicians, civil servants, journalists and civil society actors.¹ Our cases vary in terms of institutional design, colonial legacy, economic development, and party system. All have populations below one million and small legislatures and cabinets (see Table 1). This combination of small size and variation on the other main variables that might explain differences between executive functions is key to our empirical contribution. Third, we provide an empirical investigation of how the core executive works in six small states. We structure this discussion around the three functional arguments outlined above. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for core executive studies.

2 | THE CORE EXECUTIVE AND STATE SIZE

Dunleavy and Rhodes' (1990) criticism of older studies of cabinet government concerned their tendency to focus on the extent of prime ministerial predominance relative to cabinet. The core executive concept sought to advance a relational approach that emphasized the webs of actors and institutions at the heart of decision-making, focusing attention on how government functions were coordinated rather than positing that either prime minister or cabinet predominated. The key distinction was not to assume that power was fixed to a particular position but that accumulating and exercising authority was both 'contingent and relational' and therefore fluid (Rhodes 1997). Functionalists identify systemic, political and organizational constraints to core executive decision-making, thus drawing 'attention to the extent and efficacy of, and the various mechanisms for, coordination' (Elgie 2011, p. 65). So, Burch and Holliday (2004) show how the evolution of policy development, policy presentation, public sector reform and public service delivery under the Blair government attempted to marry the principles of cabinet government with the demands of modern media communications and personality-driven politics (cf. Brady and Catterall 1997). Similarly, Holliday and Shinoda (2002) compared the function of the core executive in Britain and Japan, concluding that the former had the greater capacity for coordination and ability to manage policy flows through the centre. However, these studies largely ignored Andeweg's initial (1997) criticism that the approach should be broadened to include other factors, such as accountability and legitimacy.

Dunleavy and Rhodes (1990) stressed that one value of the core executive concept over alternatives was its utility in different contexts and institutional systems. Since its introduction to the study of British central government, studies adopting a core executive approach have taken place in different contexts, across Europe and beyond

¹Fourteen from Liechtenstein (see Veenendaal 2015), 13 from St Kitts-Nevis (see Veenendaal 2014), 22 from Malta (see Veenendaal 2019), 21 from Suriname (see Veenendaal 2020); 27 from Samoa (see Corbett and Ng Shiu 2014) and 15 from Solomon Islands (see Corbett and Wood 2013; Corbett 2015a).

TABLE 1 Cases

Country	Independence date	Constitutional type	Electoral system	Number of parties	Size of Cabinet
Liechtenstein	1866	Constitutional Monarchy (with active Monarch)	Party-list Proportional representation	Coalition government—2 main parties in government, 2 additional opposition parties in Parliament.	5 (incl. Prime Minister)
Malta	1964 (from the United Kingdom)	Parliamentary	Proportional representation by STV	Single party government—2 main parties in Parliament plus 2 MPs from a third party	16 (incl. Prime Minister)
St Kitts and Nevis	1983 (from the United Kingdom)	Federal Parliamentary	FPP	Coalition government, multi-party parliament (4 parties)	9 (incl. Prime Minister)
Suriname	1975 (from the Netherlands)	Hybrid (head of state elected by legislature)	Party-list Proportional representation	Multi-party government (although largely dominated by one party) and multi-party parliament (8 parties after 2015)	18 (incl. President and Vice-President)
Samoa	1962 (from New Zealand)	Parliamentary (head of state elected by the legislature)	FPP	Single-party government—one party in Parliament plus 3 independent MPs	8–12 ministers, plus the Prime Minister but by convention a significant number of MPs have previously been 'Associate Ministers'
Solomon Islands	1978 (from the United Kingdom)	Parliamentary (head of state appointed by the Crown)	FPP	Coalition government, multi-party parliament (6 parties plus 'association of Independent members of Parliament')	24 ministers (incl. Prime Minister)

(Elgie 2011). However, even in the select few studies conducted outside large, wealthy states, coordination remained the primary focus and concern. Goetz and Margetts' (1999; cf. Zubek and Goetz 2010) study of Central and Eastern European countries found limited coordination within the executive and between the executive and other actors in the political process. They hypothesized that these linkage problems would diminish as post-communist political systems were consolidated.

No specific studies exist of the core executive or cabinet in small states despite the fact that, in light of their densely networked societies (Baldacchino 2002), they are 'least likely' cases for arguments about coordination and

executive government. The literature on public administration in small states, much of which is based on single country studies or general analysis of public administration (Jugl 2019; Randma-Liiv and Sarapuu 2019), finds that: human resources are limited and so individuals are often called upon to play multiple overlapping roles (Farrugia 1993; Chittoo 2011; Everest-Phillips and Henry 2018); this has benefits in terms of informal coordination (Chittoo 2011; Moloney 2019); but small size also blurs the line between politics and administration leading to concerns about bureaucratic performance, conflicts of interest, patron–client linkages, and corruption (Benedict 1967, pp. 47–48; Farrugia 1993; Baldacchino 1997, pp. 77–78; Ott 2000, pp. 37–39; Lodge et al. 2015); and this results in small states being prone to hyper-personalism and power concentration (Farrugia 1993; Sutton and Payne 1993, p. 587; Gerrring and Zarecki 2011, p. 23; Baldacchino 2012; Corbett and Veenendaal 2018). These findings are significant because within large states there is an increasing desire to devolve or decentralize decision-making to smaller political units (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008; Hooghe and Marks 2016; Ladner et al. 2016).

If these findings, typically emerging from single country or regional studies of public administration generally, rather than central government specifically, are correct then we believe that the dominant functional approach and its emphasis on coordination requires adaptation if it is to serve as a basis for comparative research. Although formal executive processes in small states are often similar to large ones from whom their institutions were inherited—cabinet routinely meets, papers are circulated, and decisions taken and agreed on—the predominance of informal practices means that a key function is the distribution of the benefits of office (including cars and government houses in poorer countries, channelling ministerial funds to constituencies, employing relatives and voters). This trend is apparent regardless of institutional age or design. The upshot is that small states would appear to support both Dunleavy and Rhodes' (1990) claim that we need an approach that recognizes that executive government is 'relational and contingent', and Andeweg's (1997) call to include a broader array of functions.

3 | METHOD AND DATA

Our study is necessarily exploratory and qualitative because, as the nascent literature on public administration in small states indicates, their executives are predominantly characterized by informal practices and institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). To avoid the pitfall of selecting cases on the dependent variable, we adopt a co-variational design (Blatter and Haverland 2012) focusing on six 'most different' (Lijphart 1971) small states: in Europe (Liechtenstein and Malta); the Caribbean (St Kitts and Nevis and Suriname); and the Pacific (Samoa and Solomon Islands). In addition to having populations of less than one million, these states all have relatively small legislatures and cabinet memberships, and are classified as democracies in the Freedom House index, the only aggregate democracy dataset that includes the smallest states.² But they differ on all the usual dimensions that comparative politics scholars typically employ to explain political outcomes: geographical location, (colonial) history, political institutions, physical fragmentation and economic development. They also differ with respect to the duration of their political frameworks, enabling examination of the claim that coordination challenges dissipate over time. Most importantly, they include both presidential and parliamentary systems (and a monarchy), and both single-party and coalition governments. Consequently, any similarities between these cases, and implicit divergence from mainstream functional theories, must be credited to the one shared contextual variable: small size.

We thus compare explicitly between our six cases and implicitly between the experience of small states and the assumptions about the core executive derived from a functional perspective in large states. We present the empirical material thematically rather than case by case to directly tackle the arguments from the core executive literature. The similarities and differences between these states along the dimensions we consider are summarized in Table 2.

²Liechtenstein has a long history of free and fair elections and respect for civil liberties. However, the increasingly active role of Liechtenstein's prince has led to heightened concern about the country's democratic credentials (Wolf 2016). Furthermore, in terms of Freedom House's dimension of political rights all other small states (except St Kitts and Nevis) also have a suboptimal score of '2' rather than '1'; hence, none of these countries is a 'perfect' democracy (Corbett and Veenendaal 2018).

TABLE 2 Formal and informal governance patterns*

	Formal institutions			Informal practices		
	Constitution	Government	Legislative–Executive	Power concentration	Patronage	State capacity
Liechtenstein	Monarchy	Coalition	Separate	High	Entrenched	Moderate
Malta	Parliamentary	Single party	Fused	High	Entrenched	Moderate
St Kitts & Nevis	Parliamentary	Single party	Fused	High	Entrenched	Limited
Suriname	Hybrid	Coalition	Separate	High	Entrenched	Limited
Samoa	Parliamentary	Single party	Fused	High	Entrenched	Limited
Solomon Islands	Parliamentary	Coalition	Fused	High	Entrenched	Severely limited

*The information in this table is drawn from our own empirical material.

Significantly, while the formal institutions and mechanisms for coordination vary considerably between these six cases, informal practices are largely similar, supporting the emphasis by scholars who employ a functional approach that treats executive government as relational and contingent. However, as we will show, the effects of country size mean that accountability and capacity issues are more pertinent challenges than coordination.

Any investigation that seeks to describe the factors that shape collective decision-making and situate them in relevant theory must combine the depth of a single case study with the breadth of multi-country comparison. This is made easier in our case because the size of our cases ensures some ‘family resemblance’ (Collier and Mahon 1993; Boswell and Corbett 2017). Interviews were conducted with people with the most intense involvement in political practices: political elites (both government ministers and opposition politicians), senior public servants, NGO (non-governmental organizations) representatives, journalists, other civil society activists, donor consultants, local academics, and private sector representatives. Most interviews were recorded and we include relevant quotations. In addition to formal interviews, many informal conversations added to our understanding of political practice. Interview material was supplemented from public sources (newspapers, social media, diaries, biographies, and autobiographies, records of parliamentary debates, departmental and consultancy reports). For triangulation, this primary material was complemented by an extensive survey of the area studies literature on the six countries.

4 | THE CORE EXECUTIVE AND SMALL STATES

The following section interrogates the three main arguments about coordination identified by functional studies of the core executive. First, we consider whether coordination between actors and institutions is the primary problem that confronts executive decision-makers. We find instead that the concentration of authority is a more salient concern. Second, we consider whether coordination leads to better governance. We find instead that the concentration of authority leads to clientelism and patronage-based politics. Third, we consider whether coordination problems dissipate over time. We find that capacity problems persist regardless of how old or rich small states are and that this is a more pressing challenge than coordination.

4.1 | Argument 1: Coordination between actors and institutions is the primary problem that confronts executive decision-makers

Small states have smaller executives than larger states (Gerring and Veenendaal 2020). In practice, this means that ministers and other officials must play multiple, overlapping, roles. This pattern is most acute in the smallest states in

our sample, St Kitts and Nevis and Liechtenstein, with cabinets of nine and five, respectively. Two examples indicate the range and diversity of portfolio responsibilities: Minister of Agriculture, Health, National Health Insurance, Human Settlement, Community Development, Gender Affairs, Social Services, Lands and Co-operatives (St Kitts and Nevis); and Minister for Commerce, Industry and Labour; Public Enterprises; Samoa Land Corporation; Housing Corporation; Accident Compensation Corporation; Samoa Sports & Facilities Authority; and Polynesian Airlines (Samoa). Having all of these roles overseen by one individual makes coordination much simpler. Moreover, while the formal institutional arrangements of small states mirror those of large ones, close personal connections ensure that governance is more informal because 'everybody knows everybody' (Corbett 2015b). The key difference between large and small states is that the latter have a natural level of social intimacy and informality between members of the executive, and between the executive and the general population. The benefit of this informality is that governance in small states tends to be more flexible and dynamic (cf. Lijphart 1977; Katzenstein 1985). This flexibility is particularly important because of the economic and international vulnerability of small states, which often calls for swift policy adjustments and decisive executive actions (Katzenstein 1985).

The trade-off is that while informality and multiple, overlapping roles serve a practical purpose, they also result in concentration of power amongst key leaders who are able to dominate all aspects of political, economic and social life, reminiscent of earlier prime minister versus cabinet debates that the core executive framework sought to usurp. We are not, however, suggesting that a formal, hierarchical explanation would be better at accounting for the practice of executive government in small states. Rather, the key point of our intervention is that, due to their small size, the predominance of one or a few leaders who are able to achieve centralized, top-down dominance of the executive occurs without significant disruption to the speed of government decision-making or the ability of political elites to have an intimate knowledge of local context and policy detail. As Larmour (1999) highlights, prime ministers and individual ministers in small states often know the precise location and activity of government vehicles, ships, aircraft and other equipment, alongside specific knowledge of the design and construction of government infrastructure. This marrying of high-level control and intimate involvement is not possible in a larger state where a minister might have a more specialized portfolio but responsibility for many more staff, equipment and projects.

This situation is most pronounced in Samoa, where one party has ruled for over three decades, and Liechtenstein, where the Prince has recently increased his constitutional powers vis-à-vis the elected executive. The dominance of the Human Rights Protection Party in Samoa is the result of a series of strategic institutional adaptations, including manipulating the loyalty of MPs to continuously weaken the opposition, co-opting traditional institutions, and limiting the press (So'o 2008; Iati 2013). The upshot is that the country has only had two Prime Ministers since 1988. Their longevity has led to persistent criticisms of corruption but has not harmed the HRPP electorally, with the 2016 election delivering the most comprehensive victory in the party's history. In Liechtenstein, the notion of 'dualism' enshrined in the constitution ensures that the Prince rules together with government ministers, who are accountable both to the monarch and to parliament. The Liechtenstein core executive thus consists of an ambiguous mix of elected and unelected leaders (Veenendaal 2015), but they rarely clash because ministers know that the Prince has greater constitutional authority and popular legitimacy than they do.

In Caribbean Westminster systems (see Ryan 1999), represented here by St Kitts and Nevis, leader dominance is channelled via two-party systems. The same is true in Malta, which is also a former British colony, where competition is often fiercely antagonistic. Polarization is reinforced by patron-client linkages. Access to state services critically depends on which politician or political party is in power, magnifying their personal significance. One consequence is very high levels of voter turnout (over 95 per cent of registered voters participating in elections) despite the absence of compulsory voting (Hirczy 1995; Veenendaal 2019). As one Maltese politician explained, few can escape political tribalism, and independent or neutral positions are almost impossible to maintain:

Everything here is a zero-sum game. So there is essentially ... almost no space for independent critical thinking. You belong to one tribe and if you don't belong to that tribe, it must be that you are against

it. You can't be neutral, you *cannot* be neutral. There is no space for that, and if you start behaving in a way that criticizes both political parties, for example, then you must be mad.

The final two small states—Suriname and Solomon Islands—are 'least likely' cases for power concentration because they are fragmented or 'deeply divided' societies. Suriname is often considered a successful multicultural democracy, with five distinct ethnic groups competing peacefully in democratic elections (Veenendaal 2020). However, the main logic driving its multi-ethnic coalitions is the desire to ensure that each ethnic group has access to the spoils of government, with political parties 'colonizing' the state to distribute public resources among their constituents (Ramsoedh 2016). The absence of ideology means that all political parties can cooperate with each other, but government formation is a complex and unpredictable process with personal connections between political leaders playing a significant role. This may not result in a single dominant leader as in the other four states, but the exclusive nature of these negotiations means that authority remains highly centralized.

Our final case, Solomon Islands, has never had a dominant political party. Instead, ephemeral groupings rise and fall on the strength of leadership candidates and their ambitions (Steeves 1996). When they do form, parties have little influence on their members, who frequently change sides and even contradict themselves, a practice termed locally as 'grasshopper politics' (Foukona 2018). Consequently, cabinet government in Solomon Islands has been perpetually unstable, with prime ministers constantly battling to hold together disparate coalitions between elections. Specifically, it has become relatively common for governments to be removed via votes of no confidence, with much of the prime minister's time spent placating disgruntled MPs. Former Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Rick Hou (2016, p. 2) describes how, on entering office:

I came to understand the reality of the Solomon Islands political landscape: there are no political parties—only a 'numbers game'. In fact, the so-called political parties going into the elections are usually just collections of individuals with certain interests, not necessarily anything to do with national interests. One sees these interests coming out at the time of the election of the prime minister. It is not unusual to have successful candidates from a 'political party' ending up on opposite sides of the political aisle after the election of the prime minister. The numbers game is such that you can have arch rivals 'in bed' politically.

Alongside rapid turnover, in cases like Solomon Islands where political parties are absent, the executive can fragment, with ministers running their own portfolios without coordinated policy positions (Corbett and Wood 2013). But, as we demonstrate below, even in this context, informal coordination is still relatively easy given the size of the government and the civil service.

The concentration of power typically occurs at the expense of civil society, which is characteristically absent in small states. Politicians and citizens often have close personal connections (Baldacchino 2002). In turn, this stifles criticism and dissent. Citizens are typically economically and socially dependent on government, weakening their opportunities to freely express themselves, undermining the formation and strength of civil society groups or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that, in larger countries, function to check executive power. Likewise, newspapers and other media are avenues for holding governments to account in large states, but in small states independence of the press is harder to sustain due to economies of scale and social pressure on individual journalists (Puppis 2009). News providers are often government owned and therefore open to manipulation and co-option by ruling elites. According to a St Kitts and Nevis journalist:

We have independent media, but this is such a small community that media houses are even reluctant to critique the financial records of major companies, because they don't want to lose the corporate sponsorship for the radio programming. So media houses here operate with some degree of

apprehension with regard to possible consequences from the government or from some bigger private sector organizations.

Small state media are also hampered by limited resources. The consequent absence of investigative journalism, combined with the informality of face-to-face politics in small states, paradoxically creates opaque political decision-making.

One consequence of weak civil society institutions is that the executive dominates all other political institutions. Because the executive either directly or indirectly controls virtually all public institutions, the distinction between the ruling party, the government and the state becomes blurred. Election victories can translate into near-total control of the state apparatus, while defeat leaves the other party and its supporters almost completely powerless. A Maltese journalist elaborated:

Here you can see also that elections are perceived as a complete takeover of power. So in a normal democracy, you're choosing the prime minister or a powerful person, you're choosing a cabinet, you're choosing members of parliament. But the civil service, for example, does provide continuity. Local municipalities provide continuity, federal government provides continuity, the police provide continuity. Here, the perception is that if a government is switching from Labour to Nationalist, everything is going to change.

In sum, coordination between actors and institutions is not the primary problem that confronts executive decision-makers in small states because they are small in number and able to marry high-level control of policy mechanisms with intimate knowledge of local context and the status of key projects. The trade-off is that informal coordination and concentration of authority among key individuals who have the capacity to dominate political, economic and social life are more salient features of small state politics. They are also the aspects of political practice that reformers usually express most concern about given their implications for accountability and governance capacity.

4.2 | Argument 2: Improved coordination will lead to better governance

Scholars of the core executive in large states argue that if coordination problems are resolved then the delivery of services will improve. We might assume that, *ceteris paribus*, highly networked societies where informal coordination and leader dominance is the norm would be advantaged by small size. Instead, echoing Jugl (2019), we find that the predominance of individuals over programmatic service delivery leads more naturally to clientelism and patronage-based politics. As the literature on clientelism, patronage and other forms of particularistic politics indicates (Keefer 2007; Hicken 2011), these patterns tend to produce governance particularistic outcomes. First, the appointment of civil servants on the basis of political loyalty rather than merit means that small states tend to have oversized, partisan and often ineffective bureaucracies. Second, while clientelism may alleviate poverty, the absence of anonymity in small states means that the distribution of resources is often highly partisan, increasing inequality between groups.

The political economy of poor small states means that most citizens aspire to have family members in secure, well-paid bureaucratic employment. Consequently: 'Small state government is characteristically weighty and omnipresent and, as a result, omnipotent' (Baldacchino 1997, p. 69). Distribution of bureaucratic jobs is thus an important spoil of office with voters typically expecting politicians to fulfil personal requests, creating patron-client linkages. As one Maltese politician explained:

The danger of succumbing to that pressure in a small community like ours is enormous, because remember, these are the people you meet every Sunday when you go to church, whom your wife

meets if she goes shopping in a supermarket. And you're constantly bombarded by all of this, so this is a downside that creates enormous risks.

Consequently, public sector reform and bureaucratic rationalization have been especially problematic: small states' politicians are keenly aware that cutting public sector jobs verges on political suicide (Sutton 2007). The absence of welfare provision in small states ensures that redistributive politics and cabinet government are mutually reinforcing because '[p]atronage has ... helped Caribbean governments mitigate poverty and social exclusion' (Duncan and Woods 2007, p. 211). Clientelism and patronage allow political elites in small states to solidify and augment their authority among the electorate, and while citizens may be cynical about the intentions of politicians, by selling their votes they contribute to the survival of this system. One interviewed leader of a Surinamese political party stated:

Of course political parties in Suriname are not formed on an ideological basis, and this is also not important for cooperation. Of course all parties enter the election with the goal to end up in government. You can enter this cooperation with any of the parties, and this is based on an agreement: who gets what, and who gets which part of the cake? ... Who gets the high offices of President, Vice-President, Speaker of Parliament, ministers? And of course also things like foreign posts, ambassadors, and those kinds of things.

According to some interviewees, the prevalence of patron–client linkages also means that people become overly dependent on the government in power. As one public official from St Kitts and Nevis argued:

Too many of the people of these islands live dependently on the government, and so they look for patronage and all sorts of benefits and assistance from the government, rather than being sufficiently independent in act, in deed, and in thought. So you have this dependency syndrome in which too many people depend on the politicians for five years. And then when election time comes the politicians say: 'Well, time to pay me back. Give me the vote.' And so that militates against democracy.

As elsewhere, patronage in the Surinamese public sector has also created an oversized and ineffective civil service, which functions as an enormous drain on public resources. Because there are too many employees, many have little work to do and are even asked to stay home, becoming 'ghost' officers or workers (Dutch: *spookambtenaren*) on the payroll of their ministry. This phenomenon is not uncommon in other small states.

Bureaucrats and politicians may be related and the former may be selected on that basis. In Solomon Islands *wantoks* (literally, one language—in a country of more than 60 languages) are often given preference by kin in employment at all levels, in the expectation that reciprocal obligations will be fulfilled, leading to both corruption and inefficiency. Constituency development funds (CDFs)—where MPs are allocated state funds for discretionary use (Fraenkel 2011)—attract particular criticism for encouraging corruption and mismanagement. The popularity of CDFs underscores the type of 'bargain' (Lodge and Stirton 2009) made by the political class to ensure that systems designed for large states work in small ones. Resource distribution in wealthier small states, like Liechtenstein, is an exception to this general trend as revenues from offshore finance and banking are so high that an extensive welfare state (with very cheap or even free education and healthcare) is viable despite limited taxation. But, even in Liechtenstein, blurred lines of accountability and conflicts of interest fuel persistent criticisms of corruption and patronage. Executive politics in small states is thus often 'spoils' politics (Buker 2005), with ministers using their position to grant preferential access to resources and employment for their constituents.

In sum, while small states have a natural level of coordination due to informal networks and the concentration of authority in the hands of key leaders, this does not mean that service delivery necessarily improves. Rather, both trends fuel clientelism and patronage-based politics that undermine programmatic policy delivery, create a bloated bureaucracy, blur lines of accountability, and heighten concern with corruption.

4.3 | Argument 3: Linkage problems dissipate as policy systems consolidate³

A similar prevalence of patronage and clientelism occurs in new or developing democracies elsewhere. As Goetz and Margetts (1999) highlight, in such circumstances we could attribute these challenges to the newness of liberal democratic states. Most small states, including Malta, St Kitts and Nevis, Samoa and Solomon Islands, have been democracies since independence in the 1960s and 1970s. Our sample also includes one state never colonized in the modern era (Liechtenstein), and one that experienced an authoritarian regime (Suriname) between 1980 and 1987. Irrespective of their previous regime type, the presence of colonial rule, or even authoritarian government, according to Goetz and Margetts' (1999) argument we would expect to find that coordination problems will dissipate over time. Our cases challenge this claim. Regardless of their age—the youngest democracy (Suriname) is 30 years old while the oldest (Liechtenstein) has been a democracy since 1921—the primacy of informal coordination and the concentration of executive authority is common to all, as outlined above. Similarly, as we have shown, political practices (including clientelism) are persistent features of political life that have not faded as policy systems have aged. The final point we make to counter this argument is the other perpetual governance challenge for small states that we have only hinted at thus far: administrative capacity constraints—that is, limited human resources—created by the attempt to operate institutions designed for large states in small societies.

Like ministers, bureaucrats in small states are neither specialized nor do they 'enjoy the luxury of concentrating on one responsibility or a specific cluster of concerns' (Farrugia 1993, p. 222). They thus face 'severe and permanent challenges' in accessing an adequate range and depth of technical skills to fulfil the basic functions required for such crucial issues as monitoring public expenditure and maintaining financial accountability (Haque et al. 2012). Officials in small states lack the interchange, access to new knowledge and stimulus provided by professional associations and meetings and may 'live in a condition of professional loneliness' (Jacobs 1975, p. 141). Key people may often be abroad for substantial periods of time and be unavailable to manage and discuss national development. Moreover, the government role extends into what is the private sector elsewhere, broadening the scope and dimensions of executive interests and diffusing core competences and time on the job. This presents wide-ranging possibilities for malfeasance and corruption, long evident in the Solomon Islands forestry sector, for example (Hameiri 2012).

Given the limited pool of human resources in small states, a few qualified individuals often perform a variety of roles, including in business, journalism, the civil service, or third sector organizations. These overlapping functions create potential for frequent conflicts of interest. As a Surinamese politician highlights:

Especially in parliament we see that people sometimes receive three salaries, all from state funds And these salaries are very high in comparison to ordinary jobs. Some politicians are simultaneously policy advisers in ministries, or they are school directors or directors of other public institutions. And as an MP, how are you going to objectively discuss the budget of these institutions if you yourself are employed there? So that is not right, seeing that you have to exercise control in parliament.

While Suriname has attempted to introduce legislation to prohibit such 'double functions', the excessive costs of establishing and maintaining patron–client networks also means that most politicians are reluctant to give up their additional roles, reducing the time available to discharge any particular function effectively. Conflicts of interest are a problem for all states, but overlapping roles and close personal connections between politicians and citizens means that awareness of them is magnified in small societies.

These challenges are exacerbated by successful bureaucrats moving to growing numbers of regional and international organizations (Baker 1992; Liki 2001), which may not necessarily represent the interests of their government. Even aid agencies, including international NGOs, provide many good jobs and create 'perverse incentives' that 'result in a flow of administrative and technical talent from the public sector' (Moore 2011, p. 1771). Such individuals often

³The material in this section has been adapted with permission from Corbett and Connell (2015).

continue to work on policy issues relevant to small states but are no longer specifically involved in national development. Limited economic growth and development opportunities have also resulted in substantial out-migration, including of highly skilled workers, notably in the health sector, leading to brain drain and a reduced pool of qualified professionals. Poor career prospects and low pay (except in Liechtenstein and to some extent Malta), limited recognition, frequent reshuffles and lack of clear policy direction discourage public sector employment, and deaden enthusiasm. Some of those with ambition and education, who might be expected to offer leadership and management expertise, have left, permanently or temporarily. Such trends have been apparent for several decades in contexts where 'only a few brains need to be drained before a serious systemic crisis occurs' (Baker 1992, p. 16). Consequently, senior positions may be unfilled because of scarce qualified personnel. Those acquiring formal qualifications or marketable skills tend to seek employment in better-remunerated roles with donor agencies or overseas. The consequence is a perpetual shortage of both people and skills (Haque et al. 2012, pp. 16–17). Turnover within particular departments and ministries is a further complication, while even more rapid turnover characterizes political representatives.

Further pressure on the scarce human resources of small states follows the increased expectation that they will participate in international meetings and organizations. For island states this is strongly linked to climate change and its anticipated impact on their future prosperity and even existence. International forums are increasingly highly technical arenas and both political leaders and public service delegates rely heavily on the advice of officials for analytical support. However, while complex international negotiations require complex technical knowledge, the recruitment, development and retention of high-quality officials are perpetual challenges. One solution to this dilemma, which is employed by European microstates like Liechtenstein, is to 'outsource' these functions to larger neighbouring states. Liechtenstein has adopted the Swiss franc as its currency and makes use of the Swiss postal service, while Switzerland also undertakes much of Liechtenstein's consular and diplomatic representation in foreign affairs.

In sum, capacity constraints created by the need for small states to operate institutions designed for large states with limited, and often diminishing, human resources are a constant challenge regardless of how old or well consolidated political systems are. This trend is exacerbated by 'brain drain', which further intensifies the need for individuals to fulfil overlapping roles. Like the centralization of authority and clientelism, these capacity issues are more prominent challenges than coordination for small states.

5 | CONCLUSION

The key distinction between the core executive approach as formulated by Dunleavy and Rhodes (1990) and older studies of cabinet government is that the former does not assume that power is fixed to a particular position but that accumulating and exercising authority was both 'contingent and relational' and therefore fluid. This emphasis aligns with the practice of executive politics in small states. However, as Andeweg (1997) highlights, most studies that adopted a functional approach to the core executive have focused on coordination as the pre-eminent governance challenge, often to the exclusion of other factors. In doing so they have argued that: coordination between actors and institutions is the primary problem that confronts executive decision-makers; improved coordination will lead to better governance; and linkage problems dissipate as policy systems consolidate.

As we have shown, coordination is not the primary governance challenge in small states, regardless of their world region, institutional system, political system consolidation, colonial legacy or economic development. Rather, as Table 2 shows, leader dominance and the concentration of authority, clientelism and patronage, and capacity issues are paramount.

Consequently, the functional approach needs to be adapted if it is going to serve as the basis for comparative research beyond large, wealthy states. Specifically, following Andeweg (1997), we have argued that a focus on accountability and capacity are more pertinent to small states. While we concede that these are 'least likely' cases for coordination problems, our exploratory analysis nevertheless indicates that there are good reasons why these

factors might also be significant elsewhere. Indeed, studies adopting a functional approach outside large, rich states echo our findings (e.g., Goetz and Margetts 1999). But, they tend to assume that these problems will dissipate once policy systems consolidate. Our analysis, resting as it does on the empirical data of policy systems that are all at least 30 years old, indicates that this argument is also problematic.

One further way of substantiating our claims would be to focus on what Rhodes and his co-authors refer to as 'court politics' (Rhodes and Tiernan 2016) and its implications for the practice of executive governance in small states. This approach retains a focus on the relational and contingent nature of executive government by foregrounding the influence of intentional agents and the coalitions they form. But, rather than functions, it pays greater attention to the meanings and beliefs of key actors, the manoeuvring and strategizing required to realize policy goals, and the intrigue and conspiracy that inevitably follows success and failure of key personalities. Given the hyper-personalized nature of small state politics, a 'court politics' approach suggests distinct advantages for the study of executive decision-making. Space precludes a focus on individual small state courts here but, given the increasing number of such studies in larger states, small state scholars undertaking future research on executive decision-making may well regard this as a better explanatory framework.

Here we have taken the more modest but still fundamental intermediary step of highlighting the limitations of the functional approach, as currently utilized, when applied to a distinct context: small states. Small states are easily dismissed as exotic, extreme cases that have little to offer by way of general lessons. We disagree. Because there are more small states than ever—roughly 20 per cent of all states—their experience is more common than that of large, wealthy European democracies. If one of the key virtues of the core executive approach is that it will improve comparative analysis, then the experiences of these cases is an important empirical test for supposedly universal theories. By studying the practice of executive government in small states we also learn something about large states, too.

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